FORMULATING A RESEARCH QUESTION

The goal of a research question is to direct and guide you as you begin your research. Unlike a thesis, which provides an interpretive argument that answers a question, at this stage you are formulating the question. Essentially, imagine you’re a teacher and you’re writing a prompt that your students are answering – in this case, you’re both teacher and student.

A good research question should...

• Be specific – the more specific & narrow you are, the more substantial your writing will be. It is much more satisfying to write on a specific topic (general questions end up producing “fluffy” writing). “Why is Terrorism Significant in the World today?” is very general whereas “How have US policy changes after 9/11 altered US relations with Muslim populations in Northern Africa?” is very specific and will allow for much more interesting research.
• Be answerable within your intended length - “What is the role of US Military in the world today?” is far too broad for an eight page paper, whereas “What are the roots of US-Iranian tension in the 21st century?” is more manageable (though might still be too broad).
• Be flexible – Your question can and likely will change as your research. Research is a circular process, answering one part of your question may change the way you approach other parts; allow for those changes if you think they will make the paper better.

When you formulate your question, integrate it into a paragraph providing some background on your topic (some of what you have learned so far about the issue). From this paragraph I should be able to have a clear idea of exactly what is interesting to you about the issue and where your investigation and research will go.